

God Does Not Show Favoritism

Acts 10:34-43

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Sometimes it's just lunch. You sit down with another person, you order some food, you banter back and forth, you say your goodbyes and go your own way. Sometimes it's just lunch. Hopefully you enjoy your time with the other person, but nothing earth shaking transpires. Sometimes it's just lunch.

And sometimes...sometimes...it is so much more than just lunch. Peter and Cornelius sat down together for lunch, but it was not just lunch. This was one of those lunches that changed the world for these two people. This was one of those lunches that changed the world for countless people. This lunch between Peter and Cornelius was literally by divine appointment. God's hand was present in this lunch.

When I say this lunch was by divine appointment, I mean it really was by divine appointment. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, lived in Caesarea, an ancient city that had been rebuilt in honor of Caesar Augustus. Cornelius is described as a "God-fearing man." He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. He was not Jewish. He was not Christian. But he was God-fearing. One day as he was making his afternoon prayers, he had a vision. He saw an angel who told him his prayers had come before God. The angel instructed Cornelius to send some men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who was called Peter. Cornelius obeyed the angel and sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to head to Joppa. Both Joppa and Caesarea were seaside cities, separated by about 30 miles.

While the ones sent by Cornelius were traveling from Caesarea to Joppa, Peter went up on the roof to pray. His stomach was growling, he was hungry, he wanted something to eat, and while he was waiting for the meal he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet was let down to earth by its four corners. The sheet included all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. A voice told

him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” Peter’s response was spoken like a true Jew. “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” Peter was bound to his Jewish heritage, a heritage that included dietary laws that were very specific about what you could and could not eat. Apparently, the sheet he saw was filled with animals that were unclean. Peter said, “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice from heaven was not done speaking. Although Peter was in the right regarding all the Jewish teachings about clean and unclean animals, God had something new to say. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times.

Peter and Cornelius have not sat down together for lunch yet, but already you can tell that when they do get together it is not going to be just any lunch. This lunch is by divine appointment. The men sent from Cornelius arrive at the house where Peter is staying, and just as they do the angel who has been talking to Peter tells him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them for you.” The men arrive, Peter greets them, accepts their invitation, and together they travel to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius. It turns out the lunch includes many more people than Peter and Cornelius, for Cornelius has gathered a large group of people to meet with Peter. The large group does not take away from the fact that the key players in this drama are Peter and Cornelius. Although Peter has obeyed God and gone to the home of Cornelius, as he enters the home he makes sure he says, “You are well aware that is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile...but God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Oh no, this is not just any ordinary lunch, as Peter makes quite clear. A righteous Jew has entered the home of a Gentile, and by inference a home considered impure or unclean. But Peter is learning from God not to call anyone impure or unclean. Friends, this is a huge step in terms of the gospel. Doors are being opened here that are transformative. Diet, custom, racial and ethnic background, and religious rules are being bent and shaped and even set aside, for the new thing that God is doing. What is that new thing?

Cornelius invites Peter to speak, and Peter takes him up on the invitation “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” To back up this new realization Peter tells the story of Jesus. Peter tells how Jesus was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and power and how he went around doing good and healing all...because God was with him. Peter tells how Jesus was crucified, how he died by hanging from a cross. Peter also tells how God raised Jesus from the dead. What Peter shares is the good news of the gospel. While Peter is still speaking the Holy Spirit comes on all those listening. As a sign the Holy Spirit was present, they were speaking in tongues. By this point Peter is all in. He says there is absolutely no reason these Gentiles should not be baptized, and right then in the home of a Gentile they had a baptismal service, in the name of Jesus Christ.

When God called Abraham, the father of faith, God promised that through Abraham all nations would be blessed. In the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, the blessing of Christ filled their lives. Isaiah prophesied that when the Servant of the Lord came, he would be a light to the Gentiles. In the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, the light of Christ shined into their lives. Jesus said God’s love was for the whole world, the entire world, for all of God’s creation and all of God’s children. In the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, the love of God became real as a love that was for all people. Peter got it. “God shows no favoritism.” Oh yes, sometimes it’s just lunch. But not that day. That day, in the home of Cornelius the Gentile, it wasn’t just lunch. That day was a taste of heaven, the beginning of something new, something that will come to final fruition when there is a great feast, a feast where people will come from east and west and north and south and sit down together at the Table of the Lord.

A pastor sat with a man one day in a coffee shop. For all who might have noticed them it probably looked like it was just lunch. But that day the pastor took a napkin and a pen and wrote two words. On one side of the napkin he wrote the man’s name, Dave. On the other side of the napkin he wrote another name. The other name was God. Then the pastor said to Dave, “Between you and God there is a gulf. You are separated from God. Sin is the thing that separates you from God. Sin is what separates every human being from God. The Bible says that sin separates us from God,

and it also tells us that everyone has sinned. We are all separated from God by our sin.”

Then where that gulf was, that gulf separating humans from God, the pastor drew a bridge. It was just a line connecting God and humans. But then the pastor added another line, so that the bridge took the shape of a cross. Then the pastor said to Dave, “God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, to forgive our sins. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, God made a bridge for us.” On a napkin in a coffee shop the pastor was sharing the good news of the gospel with Dave. He wasn’t pointing a finger of condemnation at Dave. He was pointing at the cross of Christ and saying, “He is the way of salvation.” The pastor was telling Dave that the good news was for him.

The story of Dave is a pretty neat story. The pastor who told the story was named Bill. That pastor named Bill had hit a low point. He was burnt out. He saw a therapist. The therapist asked Bill what he did outside church. Bill said, “I don’t have a life outside of church.” The therapist asked, “What do you do for fun? What do you like to do?” Fun? Now that was a novel idea. Then Bill remembered sailing with his dad when he was young. That had been fun. The therapist said, “Why don’t you take up sailing.”

Since the idea was to build a life outside of church, Bill decided to put an ad in the paper and get a crew together. The guys who signed up were definitely not from church. That pastor named Bill said they were a salty bunch. He said they told the crudest jokes, jokes you could not repeat in church, or even in mixed company. And then with an embarrassed smile that pastor named Bill said, “But man those jokes were funny.” And right in the middle of the salty crew was a guy named Dave. So full of life everyone called him “Super Dave.” Dave was full of life, but he was far from faith. Dave was on a path of pleasure, and he didn't have any need for God.

Bill tells a story that covered six years. At the beginning, he and Dave established a friendship. The first major breakthrough came when Dave got married. He asked Bill to perform the ceremony. The pastor named Bill said he has never officiated at a service quite like the one for Super

Dave. But it was good to be present with him at such a momentous occasion. Later, Dave's wife became a Christian. That threw Dave for a loop. What was she doing taking this religion stuff seriously?

One day, the pastor named Bill sat down with Dave at a coffee shop and shared with him about Jesus Christ. Some passing by might have thought it was just lunch. But it wasn't just lunch. That pastor named Bill used an old and trusted illustration. There is a wide gulf separating God from human beings. Writing on a napkin, he drew God on one side of a canyon and humans on the other. He told Dave that God had provided a bridge, a way for us to come to God, and overcome the sin that separates us from God. He drew in a cross, which formed a bridge. Looking intently at Dave, Bill asked him, "Dave, where are you in this illustration? Are you about to put your foot on the bridge? Are you a few steps away? Where are you, man?" Dave said, "Pastor, I'm not even close to the bridge. I'm over there, three booths away." Bill said his heart sank. All this friendship and work, and Dave was not even close. Then Dave said, "But if it makes you feel any better, a year ago I was two blocks away."

Several years passed, and Christmas rolled around. That Christmas Eve, Dave and his wife attended services with Bill and his family. They came to their house after the service. As he was leaving, Dave said to his pastor, the pastor named Bill, Dave said, "I'm in." Bill said, "What do you mean?" Dave said, "I'm good to go." Again, Bill hesitated. Finally, Dave said, "I turned my life over to Christ. I'm in." And they embraced and celebrated the new life that had filled Dave.

Later, when it came time for Dave to be baptized, all the theology of baptism had been studied and explained. However, Dave was still uncertain about the logistics. He said to that pastor named Bill, "How do we do the baptism?" Jokingly, Bill said, "The deeper the sin, the deeper the dunk." Dave, thinking he was serious, said, "You'd better take me all the way down."

As Bill finished telling the story of Super Dave, he showed us a video. It was a video of those who were baptized at his church not long after that Christmas Eve service. They were gathered at a lake. As he began the video, Bill said, "Try to guess which one is Dave." The video was

beautiful. The faces of men and women as they came up, spewing water and radiant with God's love was enough to bring tears to any person. Late in the video, Bill takes a man and immerses him ... and takes him down, lower and lower, all the way down. Then he lifts him up. It's Dave. Dave rises from the water with his arms raised and a shout of praise. When Bill sat down with Dave and drew a picture on a napkin representing how the cross of Christ is our bridge to salvation, you better believe it wasn't just lunch. I wouldn't be surprised if Dave took that napkin home as a souvenir, the napkin with a drawing, Dave on one side, God on the other, and a cross that points to Jesus Christ.

A youth pastor found out one of the kids in youth group was having a birthday. The youth pastor called the kid up and asked if he wanted to go out to lunch for his birthday. I guess you could say it was just lunch. I mean, the two of them went to Wendy's. It was nothing fancy. I guess you could say it was just lunch. Now this youth pastor was a clever fellow. He invited the kid to come by his house before they went to lunch. When the kid arrived, the youth pastor took him outside to show him the backyard. With a troubled look the youth pastor said, "I have all these leaves on the ground. I don't think I will ever get them all raked up. Say, do you think you could help rake these before we go out to lunch?" The kid was young and gullible. He grabbed a rake and made big piles, ultimately hauling them away. The yard looked great. The youth pastor returned...oh no, he had not stayed and worked on the leaves...the youth pastor returned and was effusive in his praise. You worked so hard. You did a great job.

By this point the kid had worked up a big appetite. He started walking toward the house when the youth pastor slyly said, "Did you notice the swimming pool?" The pool was littered with leaves. Nodding toward the pool equipment the youth pastor said, "Get the pool clean and then we will have lunch." Another hour passed as the hard working, industrious kid cleaned the pool until it sparkled and shined. The youth pastor returned...oh no, he had not stayed and worked on the pool...the youth pastor returned and was effusive in his praise. You worked so hard. You did a good job. By this point the kid was not only ready for lunch, he felt he was owed a big, hearty, expensive lunch. The youth pastor said, "Let's go. Get in my car." The kid literally raced to the front yard. There he found

a VW bug, an old school one, itsy bitsy. The youth pastor said, “Do you mind riding in back. Promise needs to be in the front seat.”

Promise was the youth pastor’s German Shepherd. Who invited Promise to lunch? Oh no, it wasn’t time for lunch yet. The youth pastor said, “We need to take Promise to the vet first.” Sitting in the back seat of a VW bug, with Promise and her abundant hair she shed so profusely, the kid was beginning to question his decision to let his youth pastor take him out to lunch. Well, Promise had her visit, they returned the dog home, and at around 4:30 in the afternoon they headed to lunch. They drove by a nice steakhouse. They passed a delicious Italian eatery. They didn’t stop at the town’s best pizza parlor. They pulled into a Wendy’s. How do you think that kid felt after the leaves, after the pool, after the trip to the vet, after being covered with 50 pounds of dog hair, after 4 or 5 hours of chores...on his birthday...how do you think that kid felt sitting in a Wendy’s restaurant, hanging out with his youth pastor, on his 19th birthday?

That was December 4, 1979. It was my 19th birthday. Last fall, September of 2018, 39 years later, my youth pastor retired. He is also one of my closest friends. He is a mentor. He is a huge part of my life. I wrote him a note. In the note I teased him about our infamous lunch at Wendy’s on my 19th birthday. Even though I tease him about that often, I want to tell you that day it was not just lunch. My youth pastor, Mark Nazarian, I don’t know whether he knew it, but at 19 I was drowning. I was drifting aimlessly. I was discouraged. I was lost. I was looking for something. I was searching for something. I was desperate for a purpose in life, for real meaning. That day it was not just lunch. It was the beginning of a relationship that transformed my life. Actually, it was the beginning of two relationships. I am grateful for both. It was the beginning of a beautiful and blessed friendship with Mark Nazarian. But more importantly, it was the beginning, the true beginning, of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It wasn’t just lunch. That lunch led to an invitation to do a sermon at our church. Me? Give a sermon? I did. It was not memorable. It was certainly not great. But it was the first time I tried to put into words what my faith meant to me. Then Mark asked me to work with junior high kids as a volunteer. Then Mark broke my heart and said he was moving to

Sacramento, California, four hours away. Then Mark did something amazing. He asked if I wanted to move to Sacramento, to live with he and his wife Jenny, and Promise their hairy German Shepherd, and work with youth at the Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church. Through that experience Mark encouraged me to go to seminary. Mark took our college group to a mission conference. Along the way Mark invited a young woman with a passionate heart for Jesus to work with the youth at the church. Her name was Julie Stone. I think you can guess what her name is now, and I am absolutely certain you know what an incredible gift and blessing Julie is in my life.

It wasn't just lunch when Peter and Cornelius sat down to break bread. Walls were being torn down and a wide path was being opened up so that all people could find salvation in Jesus Christ. It wasn't just lunch when Pastor Bill sat down with Super Dave and drew an image of a cross bridging a huge gulf. It wasn't just lunch when Mark Nazarian called me up and said, "Hey Wayne, I heard it's your birthday." It wasn't just lunch when a man named Nicodemus came up to Jesus and asked how in the world a person could be born again. It probably wasn't lunch at all, since Nicodemus came late at night, under the cover of darkness. But that day Jesus told Nicodemus that the love of God was for all people. "For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life." Something big happened when Peter and Cornelius had lunch. And God wants it to happen again and again and again, until every dividing wall of hostility is torn down, until every tribe and every tongue, every race and every color across every ocean and from every continent joins together as one family at one table giving worship and praise to our one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Oh people, every time we have a lunch, or a coffee, or greet a neighbor, or reach out to a co-worker, or notice a new student, or serve dinner at the Warm Center or swing a hammer with habitat or sew a quilt or say a prayer or welcome the stranger or the alien, every time we reach out with the love of God that is for this whole entire world, and every time we share the love of Christ, we draw just a little bit closer to that great and glorious day when people will come from east and west and north and south and join their hearts together in one great fellowship of love that covers this whole wide earth.